

## For richer, for poorer



Shop signs on streets such as the Getreidegasse are strictly governed. Even McDonald's had to conform.

Photo: *Michael Shmith*

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### **Michael Shmith spent Mozart's birthday in Salzburg - a beautiful city with a calculating heart.**

You don't as much fly into Salzburg as drop in. The WA Mozart airport is encircled by mountains, looming ominously out of the dark. One imagines that during the day the white slopes are thick with skiers, hikers, abseilers and lines of von Trapp wannabees, dusted with snowflakes that grow on your nose and eyelashes, looking for that lonely goatherd or a clump of edelweiss.

Before one has a chance to calculate how long it would have taken Maria to climb every mountain in Austria, or if several alps have been removed to allow for a runway approach, we are on the ground. WAM is a small airport (string quartet rather than symphony), with disembarkation down steps on to the tarmac, one official at passport control, and a single baggage carousel piled with long, thin, black-canvas ski-bags, grabbed by the lean and lither passengers heading for the hills.

Ten minutes after the engines stop, we are in the taxi to the hotel, riding along the glassy, icy streets, around a mountain or two and along the snowy banks of the Salzach, which divides Salzburg between old and new cities; 15 minutes later, it's schnitzel with noodles just before the dining room closes. It is only 11pm. On television - this is the day before Salzburg's most famous son's 250th birthday - among the jumble of game shows, shopping channels and news in Swiss-German, German, and Italian, the most musical offering is a dubbed episode of *The Sopranos*: James Gandolfini is no Figaro.

It is important to remember that Salzburg is essentially a provincial city (a more polite term for "small town") with a population of 140,000, most of whom, it seems on this chilly evening, are

already under their goose-down quilts, slippers by the bed, and Hunden curled at their feet. Yet, for all its Gemutlich charm, Salzburg's extraordinary history ensured its position as a place of wealth, religious and political might, and an incomparable centre of science and culture long before Mozart wailed his way into the world on the night of January 27, 1756 in the tall, yellow house at Getreidegasse 9.

Yet it is Wolfgang you-know-who who has become Salzburg's demigod. After three days of seeing his periwigged countenance on posters, in shop windows, painted on Easter eggs, printed on tea towels, baked on to bread, iced on to cakes and formed into marble busts, enamelled pill-boxes, cufflinks and coinage, you could easily believe he was not just the greatest composer who ever lived, he was the *only* composer who ever lived.

Early on Friday morning, after a small Austrian breakfast of juice, fruit, yoghurt, pastries, cheese, cold ham, scrambled eggs, bacon, potatoes, tea and a wedge of Kugelhopf, it's on to a fast trolleybus to look round the old town. You can easily do this in a morning - and that's allowing for a stop at the city's oldest cafe, Tomaselli (est. 1703), where you can hog a table for hours, reading a paper secured on a wooden stick (headline on the Kurier, under a five-column picture of Mozart's eyes: "Alles Gute, Wolferl!"), sipping hot chocolate and wondering which cake to order next.

Narrow streets, such as the Getreidegasse, give on to larger squares with glorious churches and cathedrals and handsome public buildings, all contained in a narrow band between the Salzach and the practically vertical rocky cliffs of the Monschsberg - the Monks' Mountain - topped by the Hohensalzburg Fortress, a place so fortified that if you locked the keys in, you may as well sell it, complete with 360-degree views, ramparts and its own torture chamber.

Further along the Monschsberg, almost jutting over the precipice, is a recently built gallery of modern art. It is a wide concrete expanse with a long, horizontal slit of glass let into its base. Emblazoned on the top left of the building is a stave, without musical notation but with two scrawled blue "X"s, a red ampersand, and four stencilled signs, "INSIDE" "OF", "OUTSIDE", "OF", "ITSELF". Mozart had his Masonic rituals but contemporary Salzburg isn't lacking in runes and codes.

Down in the old town, almost directly under the gallery, is another relatively modern building, the Grosses Festspielhaus (large festival house), which was built in the 1960s, abutting the astonishing outdoor Felsenreitschule (Rocky Riding School), whose tiered arches form a natural amphitheatre. The festival, the very symbol of Salzburg's cultural life, is held every July and runs for a month. It was started in the 1920s by the actor and director Max Reinhardt; with the support of composers such as Richard Strauss and the great musicians and actors of the day, the city became the centre of Austrian, then European, artistic development. In spite of interruptions such as the war, Salzburg flourished; it hosts the third-oldest arts festival in Europe.

Salzburg was given extra status from the mid-1950s by the directorship of Herbert von Karajan, Salzburg's other great son, and far more powerful and wealthy than Mozart was in his time. Von Karajan was born in 1908, just across the Salzach in a much more respectable house (mansion, really), near the Mirabelle Palace and gardens - Salzburg's answer to Versailles. A sculpture of the conductor, his baton raised to an invisible orchestra, is in the front garden.

Although he was an international star, von Karajan was never too far away from Salzburg - in later life, he lived in the nearby village of Anif, roaring in his Porsche down the hill to the Festspielhaus, where his personalised park was right outside. He died at Anif in 1989. Von Karajan's influence on Salzburg was artistically profound. His directorships of the Berlin Philharmonic and, for a shorter time, the Vienna State Opera meant he had two institutions (along with the Vienna Philharmonic, which plays for the opera) to perform in his purpose-built opera house/concert hall; and his recording contract with Deutsche Grammophon was also good in perpetuating his own performances and productions: the multi-talented von Karajan preferred to direct as well as conduct.

While the cultural advantages were considerable, and ensured Salzburg retained its position as one of the world's leading festivals, the disadvantages of exclusivity and expense remain. Its ticket prices have always been astronomical, and there has never been any shortage of buyers, let alone multinational sponsors. This year's festival, for example, has received enough ticket requests to fill the theatres seven times over; this includes a new theatre nearby, named after Mozart, which opens in July, in time to cope with the extra demand of performing all of Mozart's 22 operas over four weeks.

As for the public who can't get a look in to the main festival events, they must receive their culture elsewhere. This was certainly exemplified on Mozart's birthday night. In the Festspielhaus, Riccardo Muti conducted the Vienna Philharmonic and a starry array of soloists in a marathon concert of concertos, arias and symphonies; it was booked out months ago but was shown on Austrian national television (perhaps they had to move The Sopranos). The public, though, were "invited" to a free outdoor concert in the main square, Dom Platz. This amplified melange of extracts and - worse - souped-up arrangements with disco beats did Mozart no favours. Mind you, by the end of a year of so much WAM, the good people of Salzburg might want sanctions applied.

Salzburg's main industry - apart from WAM and things festive - is tourism, and there's no shortage of quality for the top end of the market. It is only three hours by train to Austria's capital, but Vienna has come West. Great Viennese hotels, such as the Sacher and the Bristol, have long-established premises in Salzburg, and the streets are filled with designer-label shops and expensive restaurants, squeezed in alongside the ubiquitous Irish pubs and McDonald's, whose sign, remarkably understated, is just a small pair of golden arches set in the medieval style.

What avarice doesn't take away - in fact, it can't even charge for it - is the knockout beauty of Salzburg. There's no priority bookings here; just walk along one bank of the river, cross over one bridge, look round the other side, and take the next bridge back. In fact, Salzburg is best appreciated from the Monschsberg, accessible by foot, if you're up to it, or a 60-second ride on the funicular railway that thinks it's a helicopter.

The view from the fortress is exactly as Salzburg appears on the map. It could almost be a stage set unto itself: the fast-flowing Salzach bisects the jostle of buildings in the old town and the more spacious gardens and boulevards of the new town. Across the river, the Kapuzinerberg marks the other side of the proscenium. The sounds of Salzburg - on this diamond-bright Saturday, various church-bells striking the hour, phrases of more tortured outdoor Mozart tributes, and the coconut-shell staccato of carriage horses - float up with

vividness, like voices over water.

The walk across the Monschsberg, from fortress to art gallery, is a narrow path that winds through the trees and up and down the hills. From here you can see Salzburg one side, the snowy plains and distant alps on the other. The citizens have taken to the heights with their dogs, who rush around in the snow, chasing their tails and each other, as dogs do.

In the evening, across to the new town to see the opera (Mozart's early work, *La Finta Giardiniera*) at the Landestheater - a pocket-sized horseshoe-shaped auditorium of just three levels, with exceptional intimacy and charm. I bought the last two seats (€30 each) in the back row of the balcony, where the sound is clear and true and half the stage obscured. After the interval, a lightning shift nearer the middle into two vacant seats.

What to make of Salzburg? It is beautiful, beguiling and must be glorious in the summer, if overcrowded. Perhaps it is like Venice, with winter a special time when the city can be more itself, without having to put on a show. It has fine food and wine, its own cafe culture, and an artistic pedigree that is second to none. Yet, for a place with such a heritage, such a soul, there is something calculating about it all.

One of Salzburg's citizens had to leave in the end. He went to Vienna to find work and never returned. That was Mozart. Outside Cafe Tomaselli is a banner proclaiming Mozart Week, with the same image of the composer's eyes as on the front page of the *Kurier*. It might have been one *heisse Schokolade* too many, but don't they appear slightly accusatory?

Michael Shmith, The Age travel editor, is visiting Salzburg as guest of the Austrian National Tourist Office and Emirates airline.

## Fast facts

**Getting there:** There are no direct flights to Salzburg from Australia, but several airlines (Emirates and Austrian among them) fly to Vienna, from where Salzburg is less than an hour's flying time. There are also frequent trains between Vienna and Salzburg, with a two-and-a-half-hour travelling time.

**Visa:** No visas are required for Austria.

**Getting around:** Salzburg is best explored on foot. Its historic centre is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and cars are discouraged. There is an excellent public-transport system, with frequent trolleybuses servicing most parts of the city. You can buy a Salzburg Card for up to 72 hours, which offers free public transport, including the funicular, and free or discounted museum entries.

**Staying and eating there:** Salzburg has many top-of-the-range hotels, with prices to match, which rise steeper than the Monschsberg in high seasons. There are also many mid-price hotels, especially outside the city. Salzburg restaurants offer many cuisines at various prices. Don't think of leaving town without trying *Salzburger Nockerln* - a triple-peaked soufflé of nuts that collapses at the touch of a spoon and tastes exquisite.

**When to go:** Expect Easter and July (the main festival times) to be at bursting point with international music lovers. Winter is cheaper, and if you are skiing nearby, Salzburg is unmissable for a night or two; spring and autumn are good for walking and other leisure

holidays.